

PLOTTING A FIRE:  
THE BURNING OF MEXICO'S *CINETECA NACIONAL* AND THE  
IDEA OF A SELF-DESTRUCTING ARCHIVE<sup>1</sup>

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The destruction by fire in 1982 of the *Cineteca nacional*, the largest repository of art film in Mexico, constituted the lowest point of an era characterized by censorship, lack of funding, and the virtual dismantling of the state cinema apparatus.<sup>2</sup> More than 6,500 films —of which about 3,000 were Mexican features and historical footage— went up in flames along with a still unspecified number of human bodies. Also lost were the *cineteca*'s library, which included close to 9,000 specialized books and rare journals, more than 2,000 film scripts, and precious documentation on the history of film production, distribution and censorship in Mexico.<sup>3</sup>

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2 Joanne Hershfield, "Mexico," in *The International Movie Industry*, ed. Gorham Anders Kindem (De Kalb: Southern Illinois University, 2000), 283.

3 A conservative estimate by reporter Armando Mora included: "1,476 expedientes (...): 119 expedientes de películas nacionales, no existentes en el acervo; 113 de filmes extranjeros, en iguales circunstancias, 6,176 fotografías de filmes mexicanos catalogados por títulos y elencos; 29,748 fotografías catalogadas únicamente por el título (...); 11,750 fotos de personalidades nacionales y extranjeras; 14,000 fotomontajes de películas en español; 3,480 carteles; 3,200 carpetas publicitarias, etc." Armando Mora, "Reharían la cineteca," *Esto*, March 28, 1982.

Besides almost destroying the entire film production of Juan Orol, the fire consumed, among other things, rare hand-painted prints, drawings by Sergei Eisenstein, artwork by Diego Rivera, historical footage of the Mexican Revolution and the Cristero War, murals, and historic cinematographic equipment.<sup>4</sup>

The fire occurred on March 24, 1982 during an evening screening of Andrzej Wajda's *The Promised Land* in the theater "Fernando de Fuentes" of the *cineteca*. Shortly before 7 p.m., two fire stations close to the archive received emergency calls about a possible fire. While authorities started to evacuate people from the theatres and the other facilities inside the archive building, the firemen identified the four vaults as the source of heat. There were explosions heard within a radius of three kilometers, creating a sense of panic in the upper middle class neighborhood of Colonia Country Club.<sup>5</sup> Across the *cineteca*, employees of a baby day-care center worked hard to evacuate 160 children. Five helicopters flew over the site all night long, while more than 25 ambulances tried to beat the ensuing traffic jam to carry the injured. The available water was rapidly used up, and the fear of new explosions forced firemen to watch hopelessly as the flames claimed several human lives, including that of the Chief Fireman, who had been trapped in Vault 1.<sup>6</sup> The fire lasted 14 hours, bringing about flames 50 meters high, and reaching a temperature of more than 3,600 Fahrenheit which easily melted the building's iron beams.

News of the disaster brought about a complex palette of emotions ranging from anger and indignation to profound depression among actors, directors, and film producers. Journalists and political commentators did not hesitate to describe the destruction of the *cineteca* as "the most terrible cultural loss in

4 Fernanda Sánchez Arévalo, "La cineteca nacional. Arte y Cultura en movimiento: reportaje" (Tesis de licenciatura en comunicación. Universidad del Valle de México. México, 1996). Among the equipment consumed by the fire was the camera used by photographer Gabriel Figueroa to film *María Candelaria*.

5 Anonymous, "Al arder la *cineteca* se perdió el archivo filmico de México," *El Heraldo de México*, March 26, 1982. The *cineteca* was located at the corner of Río Churubusco and Tlalpan Avenue, a heavily transited intersection.

6 Manuel Olivares and Enrique Valencia, "160 niños de la casa de cuna estuvieron en grave peligro," *El Sol de Mexico*, mediodía, March 25, 1982. According to other accounts, the number of children was 300. See Anonymous, "El cine mexicano, sin historia," *Esto*, March 25, 1982, 31-32.

modern Mexican history.”<sup>7</sup> Massive media coverage offered multiple explanations for the fire: a grease fire in a nearby restaurant, an electrical short circuit, and even sabotage. Discarding the possibility of foul play, authorities attributed the cause of fire to an act of “spontaneous combustion,” thus transforming the National Film Archive into a cellulose nitrate self-destroying machine. More than thirty years later, the cause of the fire, the exact number of the dead, and the materials lost are still a matter of debate.<sup>8</sup> Based on newspapers and official reports of the time, this chapter analyzes the complicated process of explaining and mourning the loss of an archive. It focuses in particular on the analysis of the production, circulation, and consumption of competing narratives to explain the tragic demise of the archive. Following Charles Tilly, I am less interested in evaluating the plausibility and coherence of the reasons offered, than in understanding their “appropriateness” in light of the changing relationship between citizens and the Mexican state. Regardless of their content, reasons are generally judged according to their appropriateness to the equality, inequality, intimacy or distance of the relationship between reason givers and receivers.<sup>9</sup> In depicting the nation’s film repository as an archive that could not help but to destroy itself, authorities were not only naturalizing the risk entailed in archiving; they were also making a statement about the authoritarian nature of their relationship with Mexican citizens. The trouble was that the character of such relationship was being redefined when the archive exploded.

### *Why to Archive Film? Cinema as “Cultural Heritage”*

As in the case of other film archives, the foundation of the *Cineteca nacional* responded both to a renewed concern with

7 Patrick Robertson, *The Guinness Book of Movie Facts and Feats* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991), 13.

8 See, for instance, the wide media coverage of the recent release of *Los rollos perdidos* (2012) by Gibrán Bazán, which includes valuable interviews with film critics, employees, and witnesses to the fire.

9 Charles Tilly, *Why? What Happens When We Give Reasons... and Why* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 45.

film as “cultural heritage” and new international ideas about film preservation. The early generations of film archivists justified their work by making fervent appeals to consider film not only as entertainment, but also as a form of art and history.<sup>10</sup> After the creation of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAPF) in 1938, collecting, preserving, and conserving film became increasingly associated with national pride, identity, and authenticity. However, in contrast to other cultural institutions such as libraries and museums, film archives set themselves apart by their emphasis on preservation as their main reason for existence. Much of their collections are on deteriorating nitrate or acetate stock, a fact that endowed the preservation imperative with a sense of urgency.<sup>11</sup>

Until the 1950s, film was made of cellulose nitrate, a famously unstable and highly flammable compound that demanded careful regulations of transportation, use, and storage to prevent its decay. Cellulose nitrate base film can “self-ignite” at temperatures only slightly above 38°C (100°F). Such “spontaneous” combustion requires, however, advanced states of film decomposition, as fire is rarely caused by cellulose nitrate in good condition. While decomposing, nitrate film gives off nitric oxide, nitrogen dioxide, and other gases that may cause eye and respiratory irritation, rashes, vertigo, nausea, and headaches. According to a Kodak manual for storing and handling nitrate film, cellulose nitrate must never be stored in airtight containers, for gas buildup “makes a kind of pressure cooker of the film can in which it rests.”<sup>12</sup> Once ignited, nitrate fire is almost impossible to put out. Nitrate film burns 20 times as fast as wood, and contains sufficient oxygen to continue burning underwater. In the 1960s, film archivists coined the phrase “nitrate won’t wait” to draw attention to the film’s extreme flammability and self-decomposing nature and to raise funds to

10 Caroline Frick, *Saving Cinema: The Politics of Preservation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5; Karen F. Gracy, *Film Preservation: Competing Definitions of Value, Use, and Practice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007), 20 and 87.

11 Gracy, *Film Preservation*, 18-19.

12 Kodak Company, “Storage and Handling of Processed Nitrate Film.” Kodak Company, accessed 2 August 2013, [http://motion.kodak.com/motion/Support/Technical\\_Information/Storage/storage\\_nitrate.htm](http://motion.kodak.com/motion/Support/Technical_Information/Storage/storage_nitrate.htm).

preserve the world's film heritage in archives.<sup>13</sup>

In Latin America, organizations functioning as archives embraced the urgent call promoted by FIAF to preserve moving images, but also emphasized the need to exhibit their film collections as vehicles to promote national cinema and fend off cultural imperialism. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, representatives of Latin America in FIAF congresses repeatedly questioned the necessity of devoting all archiving energies to preservation. In their eyes, films were not “museum rarities” to be put away, but vehicles of nationalism and propaganda that demanded dissemination to defend national culture against foreign influence.<sup>14</sup> In Peru, Argentina, Guatemala, Venezuela, Paraguay and Chile, film archival institutions preferred to call themselves *cinetecas*, *filmotecas*, or *cinematecas* to emphasize their dual emphasis on exhibition as well as collection and preservation.<sup>15</sup> National film screening became a political imperative as important as conservation and safeguarding.<sup>16</sup>

### *Film Archiving in Mexico*

In the case of Mexico, the tasks of archiving and exhibiting films were closely connected to the post-revolutionary state's never-ending pursuit of national prestige and modernity, and to the

13 Anthony Slide, *Nitrate Won't Wait: Film Preservation in the United States* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 1992), 1-3; Jean-Louis Bigourdan, “From the Nitrate Experience to New Film Preservation Strategies,” in *This Film is Dangerous: A Celebration of Nitrate Film*, eds. Roger Smither and Catherine A. Surowiec (Brussels: FIAF, 2002), 52-73.

14 Frick, *Saving Cinema*, 114, 165.

15 Gracy, *Film Preservation*, 18.

16 On March 23, 1965, in Mar de la Plata, Argentina, representatives of several film archives in Latin America created the Unión de Cinematecas de América Latina (UCAL) with the purpose of promoting a policy of regional integration and growth of these institutions. Among the signers were representatives of the following institutions: Cinemateca Argentina, Instituto Nacional de Cinematografía de Argentina, Cinemateca Brasileña de Sao Paulo, Cinemateca Universitaria de Chile, Departamento de Cinematografía de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Cinemateca de la Universidad del Perú, and Cinemateca Uruguay. Anonymous, “Los archivos de filmes,” *Cineteca Nacional* (Mexico City: Dirección de Cinematografía-Secretaría de Gobernación, 1974), 14.

promotion of official ideology and propaganda. In 1936, President Lázaro Cárdenas founded the first National Film Archive as part of a larger program of state intervention in motion picture promotion and protection. His successor, Manuel Ávila Camacho, helped establish the world's first film-financing cinema bank in 1942, a state-run institution originally included in earlier Cardenista plans.<sup>17</sup> In 1949, a Film Industry Law decreed the establishment of a film archive under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Cinematography of the Ministry of the Interior, and required producers to donate to the yet-to-be-created archive a print of films seeking a commercial exhibition permit.<sup>18</sup> This legal mechanism was known as "legal deposit," but it was only enforced until 1964, ten years before the *Cineteca* saw the light of day. Clearly, the first archiving efforts in cinema were related not only to the lofty ideals of preserving the nation's patrimony, but also to the mundane task of film censorship by the state.<sup>19</sup> In 1960, the UNAM (Mexico's National University) created its own film archive, the *Filmoteca*, and entrusted it with the task of locating, acquiring, restoring, and exhibiting Mexican films. A few years later, in 1967, the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) created a *Cinemateca* to hold films produced by this institution, as well as to exhibit new cinema.<sup>20</sup>

The *Cineteca Nacional* was inaugurated on January 17, 1974, following the conversion of two old sound stages of the Churubusco Studios. The facilities of the film archive included three

17 Carl Mora, "Motion Pictures: 1930-1960," in *Concise Encyclopedia of Mexico*, ed. Michael S. Werner (New York: Routledge, 2001), 505.

18 See *Ley y Reglamento de la Industria Cinematográfica* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Gobernación, 1962); Virgilio Aunduíza, *Legislación cinematográfica mexicana* (Mexico City: Filmoteca de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1984).

19 Magdalena Acosta, "Legal Deposit in Mexico," *Journal of Film Preservation* 23 (2007), 57.

20 Anonymous, "Los archivos de film en México," 17. The *Cinemateca* of the INAH should not be confused with the institution of the same name created by Carmen Toscano. In 1963, the daughter of the famous filmmaker Salvador Toscano organized a short-lived *Cinemateca* funded by private contributions. Located in the old palace of Communications, the young institution never had the approval of President Díaz Ordaz, and it was forced to vacate its premises upon his inauguration in December 1964. See Carl J. Mora, *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896-1988*, rev. ed. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 41.

film theaters, a library with 5,500 books on film and television, office space, a gallery, four vaults, a laboratory for film repair and conservation, a specialized bookshop, and a coffee shop.<sup>21</sup> The Bureau of Cinematography was located on the second floor, as well as the public records office. The *Cineteca* had two theaters open to the public, the “Fernando de Fuentes” and the “Salón Rojo,” which together were able to seat more than 714 people per screening. A third room, the “Salvador Toscano,” was available for staff and researchers, while three other small rooms were reserved for private use. The *Cineteca*’s holdings consisted of only 1,476 films at the time of its inauguration. However, this figure had quintupled by 1978 through the enforcement of “legal deposit,” donations, and direct acquisitions. Over 120 people worked in the archive.<sup>22</sup>

Heralded by Luis Echeverría’s regime as “the culmination of [national] revolutionary art,”<sup>23</sup> the *Cineteca* was a crucial ingredient of his project to nationalize cinema in an effort to restore confidence in the state, co-opt intellectuals, and legitimize his so-called “democratic aperture” following the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968. In 1971, under the guidance of the actor Rodolfo Landa (the president’s brother and director of the Banco Cinematografico), a plan had been introduced to nationalize the industry and encourage

21 “Discurso del director general de cinematografía licenciado Hiram García Borja,” *Cineteca Nacional*, 9.

22 “Envía Doña Margarita López Portillo Condolencias a los Deudos de las Víctimas. Y algo de historia sobre la ex *Cineteca*,” *La Prensa*, March 26, 1982. The estimate of the number of films held in the *Cineteca* is based on the official reports of activities issued by this institution in 1974 and 1978. Starting in 1979, the *Cineteca* stopped publishing such reports, making it impossible to know the exact number and titles of the films held in storage at the time of the fire.

23 It is worth quoting in extenso this section of the inaugural speech delivered in 1974 by the president’s brother, Rodolfo Echeverría (a.k.a. Rodolfo Landa), as it captures nicely the populist grandiloquence of the time: “La *Cineteca* es una culminación del arte revolucionario. Su fundación obedece a un largo proceso histórico donde los trabajadores, los artistas y el Gobierno han desplegado esfuerzos conjuntos para crear las condiciones indispensables al florecimiento del arte: hoy, varias décadas después de que se iniciara la primera filmación mexicana, el cine de nuestro país dispone de un instrumento precioso para desarrollar una vasta tentativa artística capaz de armonizar, en intensidad y consistencia, con el ritmo histórico que caracteriza el régimen actual.” “Discurso del C. Director del Banco Nacional de Cinematografía Rodolfo Echeverría Álvarez,” *Memoria de la Cineteca Nacional* (Mexico City, 1974), 5-6.





Figure 1: Cineteca Nacional. Source: Memoria de la Cineteca Nacional (Mexico City: Dirección de Cinematografía-Secretaría de Gobernación, 1974), 31.

the production of films addressing social and political themes.<sup>24</sup> The State's project in cinema also included the establishment of three production companies with extensive financial resources,<sup>25</sup> the purchase of movie studios such as Churubusco and Estudios América, and the creation of a filmmaking school (the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica). The new policies also improved the advertising and promotion of films at home and abroad and

24 The need for a socially committed cinema was emphasized by Rodolfo Echeverría in unequivocal terms: "La gratuidad estética ha dejado de ser un pecado venial para convertirse en un desafío histórico. Para su bien o para su mal el cineasta no tiene más opción que juzgar su realidad." "Discurso del C. Director," *Cineteca Nacional*, 4. For a detailed discussion of Mexican cinema during the Echeverría period, see Alberto Ruy Sánchez, *Mitología de un cine en crisis* (Mexico City: Premio editora, 1981); Gustavo García, "Enemigos de las promesas. Decadencia y caída del cine mexicano," *Intolerancia* 1 (January-February, 1986): 28-30.

25 Corporación Nacional de Cinematografía (CONACINE), Corporación Cinematográfica de Trabajadores y Estado (CONACITE I), and Corporación Nacional Cinematográfica de Trabajadores y Estado II (CONACITE II).



the distribution and screening of Mexican movies.<sup>26</sup> With state support, a new generation of critical filmmakers broke new ground thematically and artistically in bold revisionist movies such as *El Apando*, *Canoa*, *Las poquianchis*, *Actas de Marusia*, *La casta divina*, and *Reed: México insurgente*.<sup>27</sup> These films demonstrated “to the surprise of many critics, that the state could make serious and critical movies that avoided intellectual esotericism and in many cases became box-office hits.”<sup>28</sup> As a crowning achievement of the state’s new nationalist policies, the creation of the *cineteca* made real a long deferred dream of filmmakers and film critics. Tellingly, authorities selected a nationalist film, *El compadre Mendoza* (1933) by Fernando de Fuentes—which film critics credited as the best Mexican film ever made—to be shown on the opening of the film archive.

The *Cineteca* was only three years old when newly elected president José López Portillo made the fateful decision of appointing his sister, Margarita, as head of a new government agency, the Directorate of Radio, Television and Cinema (RTC), which oversaw all state-owned media. Under the leadership of “La Macartita”—as she was known for her McCarthy style purges of film and television industries—the new administration reversed Echeverría’s policies, leaving the production, exhibition, and distribution of films in the hands of the private sector.<sup>29</sup> In a very short period, she began the dismantlement of the Banco Cinematográfico, imprisoned film functionaries Bosco Arochi, Carlos Velo, and Fernando Macotela (of

26 According to David R. Maciel, 80 percent of screen time was allotted to foreign films—mainly North American cinema—in 1970. Four years later, 50 percent of the exhibitions in Mexico City were now domestic productions. See David R. Maciel, “Cinema and the State in Contemporary Mexico, 1970-1999,” in *Mexico’s Cinema: A Century of Film and Filmmakers*, eds. Joanne Hershfield and David R. Maciel (Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1999), 202.

27 The *nouvelle vague* (“new wave”) included a host of important directors such as Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, Jorge Fons, Arturo Ripstein, Marcela Fernández Violante, Felipe Casals and Alberto Isaac.

28 Alan Riding, *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 310. However, not all topics were open to critical exploration in cinema. According to David R. Maciel, religion and the military remained off limits. See David R. Maciel, “Cinema,” 203.

29 John Mraz, “Mexican Cinema of Churros and Charros,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 24 (1984): 23-24.

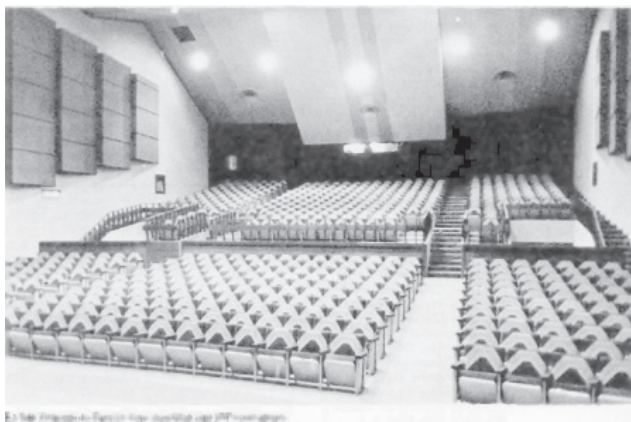


Figure 2: Theater Fernando de Fuentes. Source: *Memoria de la Cineteca Nacional* (Mexico City: Dirección de Cinematografía-Secretaría de Gobernación, 1974), 41.

Churubusco studios), Jorge Hernández Campos (of CONACINE), and seven other bureaucrats on false fraud accusations, closed down Conacite I and Conacite II, and even considered dissolving the filmmaking school.<sup>30</sup> Film quality decreased as censorship<sup>31</sup> and private investment dictated the production of low budget, lucrative, and formulaic comedies, soft porn, and drug-traffic films.<sup>32</sup> According to Joanne Hershfield, “the state financed only

30 Marcela Fernández Violante, “Lágrimas y risas: la Ley Federal de Cinematografía de 1992,” in *Conservación y legislación. Cuadernos de Estudios Cinematográficos*, ed. Armando Casas (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2007), 87; Carl J. Mora, “Mexican Cinema: Decline, Renovation, and the Return of Commercialism, 1960-1980,” in *New Latin American Cinema*, ed. Michael T. Martin (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1997), 62. The functionaries were accused of pilfering 4,500 million pesos (the amount was later “reduced” to 50 million) and spent some time in jail. In the end, the charges against the functionaries were dropped; Margarita never acknowledged that they had been unjustly imprisoned.

31 “I detest the word censorship,” Margarita quipped famously, “why not say ‘supervision’.” Carl J. Mora, “Mexican Cinema,” 63.

32 The decline of film quality was not immediate. Several important films were completed in the first two years of Margarita López Portillo’s administration, including *Cadena perpetua*, *El lugar sin límites*, *Retrato de una mujer casada*,

seven films in 1982, while private investors funded fifty-seven.”<sup>33</sup> The state withdrawal from the film industry was only aggravated when inflation, devaluation of the peso and the collapse of the price of oil brought about a drastic decrease of public expenditure of momentous consequences for the nation’s film archive.

### *Conventions: A Self-Destructing Archive*

Interviewed the night of the fire, Margarita declared to have known for a long time that the *cineteca* was sitting on “a time bomb” because of the nitrate film held in its basement. She attributed the fire to the *cineteca*’s poor design and claimed to have asked two years before for a special budget of 25 million pesos to build new vaults. According to Margarita, the government rebuffed her—even though México was still riding the petroleum wave prompted by the discovery of new deposits in 1977. By 1982 the cost of building new facilities had tripled and Margarita López Portillo blamed the “economic crisis” for the lack of appropriate vaults.<sup>34</sup>

Margarita’s statements had no pretense of providing an adequate causal account of the fire. Rather, she resorted to accepted formulas that demanded little to no technical knowledge from the audience. Charles Tilly has called this kind of reasoning of “stylized simplicity” *conventions*, which he characterizes as following rules of “appropriateness rather than of causal adequacy.”<sup>35</sup> The acceptance of conventions depends less on their explanatory value, and more on their appropriateness to the relationship at stake. Generally, hierarchical etiquette dictates that a superior “need give no more than perfunctory reasons for actions that damage or threaten the inferior.”<sup>36</sup> This is not the case, however, in times of political change, when the relationship between private citizens and the

*Llovizna*, *En la trampa*, *Amor Libre*, *La Guerra Santa*, and *Los indolentes*. All of these films were in production before Margarita took power. See David R. Maciel, “Cinema and the State,” 208.

33 Joanne Herschfield, “Mexico,” in Kindem, *The International Movie Industry*, 283.

34 Anonymous, “El cine mexicano, sin historia.”

35 Charles Tilly, *Why*, 40.

36 *Ibíd.*, 46.



Figure 3: “It was Built Upon a Time Bomb”. Source: *unomásuno* March 25, 1982.

government is contested, and conventions might become not only “inappropriate” but downright patronizing.

In ascribing the fire to the archive’s poor design under Echeverría, López Portillo merely followed a well-established script for the allocation of responsibility that rarely required further discussion. Indeed, since the 1940s, “changes in government had been accompanied by a [ritual] distantiation from the previous administration and promises of a fresh start”<sup>37</sup>. More problematic was her invocation of the term *crisis* to explain the *cineteca*’s storing deficiencies. According to Claudio Lomnitz, the use of this noun became widespread after 1982, when the Mexican government could

37 Hanspeter Stamm, “Mexico’s Unsolved Crisis,” in *Conflicts and New Departures in World Society*, eds. Volker Bornschier and Peter Lengyel (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 253; see also, Ernesto Isunza Vera, *Las tramas del alba: una visión de las luchas por el reconocimiento en el México Contemporáneo, 1968-1993* (Mexico City: CIESAS, 2001), 133.

not meet its debt payments and the country experienced its worst economic debacle since 1929. To be sure, journalists and intellectuals had long used this term to discuss situations or moments of political and economic change. However, after 1982, *la crisis* not only denoted a *time of crisis*, an era of hyperinflation, salary depreciation, and declining job security; it also implied a *crisis of time* itself, as uncertainty and general impoverishment turned futile hoping for a better future.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, treated to a constant barrage of bad news including tax hikes, reduction of state subsidies, swings in prices, and factory closings, people experienced a sense of suspension of time that Lomnitz calls “present saturation.” By invoking *la crisis* as an explanation, Margarita unwittingly inscribed the disaster into a dark and disheartening period characterized by the calamitous discredit of the Mexican State and its economic policies.<sup>39</sup>

Was the *cineteca* poorly designed? Margarita’s critics begged to differ.<sup>40</sup> The *cineteca* was designed in 1973 by architects Luis Martínez del Campo and Antonio Balmori Cinta, in association with Japanese architect Osami. The original design reserved an adjacent area for archival purposes, but space constraints forced the contractors (*constructores directos*) to build the vaults below the movie theaters. However, this did not imply that the screening rooms had been “built upon an arsenal,” as López Portillo claimed. According to several reporters, nitrate films were originally kept in a special vault in Churubusco Film Studios.<sup>41</sup> Around 1978,

38 Claudio Lomnitz, “Times of Crisis: Historicity, Sacrifice, and the Spectacle of Debacle in Mexico City,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 131, 145.

39 Lomnitz, “Times of Crisis,” 134.

40 According to architect Héctor Marcovich, “la concepción misma del edificio parece... no estar tan involucrada ... La Cineteca Nacional no tenía, estructuralmente, objeciones visibles.” Héctor Marcovich, “Arquitectura. La Cineteca Nacional,” *unomásuno*, April 3, 1982.

41 According to a reporter, “en los Churubusco escuchamos la versión insistente de que durante muchos años, y especialmente en la administración anterior, los filmes de nitrato se mantuvieron aislados en una bodega instalada en el terreno trasero de los Estudios —atrás de las oficinas administrativas— con avisos muy visibles sobre el peligro que constituían, no sabiéndose aún cuándo ni cómo fueron trasladados a la instalación de la Cineteca.” Luis Ceja, “Hasta el martes, peritaje oficial,” *Esto*, March 25, 1982. A similar story was published the following day by another reporter: “gente bien enterada, nos comentaba ayer mismo que al iniciar sus labores la *cineteca*, nunca hubo material antiguo elaborado con nitrato, justamente por ser susceptible de incendiarse y explotar.” Armando Mora, “La historia

the new Director of Cinematography, José María Sbert, made a priority of restoring and duplicating the nitrate film collections.<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, lack of funding slowed down the crucial task of transferring the nitrate film collections to acetate, and so they started to accumulate “temporarily” in vault 2 of the *cineteca*.<sup>43</sup> As the country plunged into a severe inflation, Margarita decided to disburse instead close to 40 million pesos to produce Sergei Bondarchuk’s *Campanas Rojas*, a poorly received Soviet-Mexican co-production about John Reed.<sup>44</sup> By 1982, about 2,000 300-meter cans sat in the *cineteca*’s basement, waiting to be copied onto the so-called “safety film.”<sup>45</sup>

The capricious and arbitrary patterns of state funding had fatal consequences for the *cineteca*, as a lack of resources and staff changes made nearly impossible the essential tasks of maintenance of the vaults, and the air conditioning and refrigeration systems.<sup>46</sup> According to film historian Emilio García Riera, both the air conditioning and the refrigeration systems of the vaults were not

de la cineteca hace presumir que ciertas precauciones fueron abandonadas,” *Esto*, March 26, 1982. See also, Carlos Marín, “La negligencia consumió la Cineteca Nacional,” *Proceso*, March 29, 1982.

42 See *Memoria de la Cineteca Nacional* (Mexico City: Dirección General de Radio, Televisión y Cinematografía-Secretaría de Gobernación, 1978), 6-7.

43 Armando Mora, “Como se originó la creación de esta catedral del cine. En el principio no se aceptó nitrato,” *Esto*, March 26, 1982.

44 Miguel Bueno, “Réquiem por la cineteca,” *Excélsior*, March 26, 1982. On the reception of *Campanas rojas* by Mexican film critics, see Emilio García Riera, *México visto por el cine extranjero. Vol. 5, 1970-1988* (Guadalajara, Jalisco: Ediciones Era/Universidad de Guadalajara, 1990), 80-81. The López Portillo regime also financed equally expensive co-productions with France (*La cabra*), Spain (Carlos Saura’s *Antonieta*), and Brazil (Ruy Barbosa’s *Eréndira*).

45 Fernando Osorio, “The Case of the *Cineteca Nacional* Fire: Notes and Facts in Perspective,” in *This Film is Dangerous*, eds. Roger Smither and Catherine A. Surowiec, 142.

46 Emilio García Riera, “Lo que el fuego se llevó,” *unomásuno*, March 30, 1982. See also Osorio, “The Case of the *Cineteca*,” 142. During his brief tenure as head of the Bureau of Cinematography, Jorge Durán Chávez made the fateful decision of firing the maintenance personnel that installed the air conditioning system and carried out monthly inspections to make sure the temperature in the vaults never rose above 10 degrees centigrade and the levels of humidity were adequate. See Anonymous, “La negligencia consumió la Cineteca Nacional,” *Proceso*, March 29, 1982, 44-45.



working at the time of the explosion.<sup>47</sup> This seems to be confirmed by the complaints of excessive heat in the premises by the *cineteca*'s personnel during the last three days before the fire.<sup>48</sup> In the eyes of the government's critics, it was only a matter of time before negligence met improvisation with deadly results.

### *Stories: Consider Sabotage*

In an effort to quell public criticism, authorities appointed an expert commission to establish the origins of the fire and "find the culprits." The investigation was placed under the jurisdiction of the Federal Attorney General Police (Procuraduría Federal de la República), which immediately cordoned off the area. While investigators inspected the zone, neighbors and passersby were treated to a sad spectacle of broken blocks, twisted metal, and pulverized concrete. Parked on the street, bulldozers, excavators, and dump trucks awaited the moment to undertake the daunting task of knocking down, smashing apart, and hauling away the mountain range of debris left by the fire. In spite of a powerful stench emanating from the ruins,<sup>49</sup> the heavy lifting of rubble removal had barely begun six days after the blaze. It wasn't until October, just one month before the end of López Portillo's presidency, that the damaged structure was finally demolished.<sup>50</sup>

While the official investigation was underway, a growing number of conspiracy theories explaining the fire gained media exposure. In spite of their implausibility, conspiracy stories mattered to people because they offered explanations in times of need. In contrast to the conventions offered by government

47 Emilio García Riera, "Lo que el fuego se llevó."

48 Ibid. See also Abida Ventura, "Un incendio de película," *El Universal*, March 24, 2012.

49 According to Alfredo Joskowicz, director at the film school (Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica), "las ruinas de la cineteca empezaron a despedir olores de putrefacción, que eran atenuados mediante un polvo amarillo lanzado de vez en cuando desde un helicóptero." See Ericka Montaña Garfías, "Dos décadas del incendio de la Cineteca," *Proceso*, March 23, 2002.

50 Héctor A. González, "PGR: no se derrumbarán los restos de la cineteca para continuar las investigaciones," *uno más uno*, March 27, 1982; Ericka Montaña Garfías, "Dos décadas del incendio de la Cineteca."

officers, conspiracy stories aim at offering cause-effect accounts of the exceptional events. Unfortunately, they succeed in this endeavor through simplification of actors, actions, causes and effects. According to Charles Tilly, stories gain in clarity by limiting the number of factors involved, and condensing the complexity of events into intelligible plots. “As a consequence,” he writes, “stories inevitably minimize or ignore the causal roles of errors, unanticipated consequences, and indirect effects.”<sup>51</sup> In the case of the *cineteca*’s fire, however, the legitimacy of conspiratorial explanations did not only depend on their simplified content; it also responded to the lack of credibility of the official institutions entrusted with the task of informing society.<sup>52</sup> As Charles L. Briggs has recently pointed out, “stories that resist official versions often treat events as signs of hidden meanings.”<sup>53</sup> By juxtaposing fact and fantasy in an attempt to uncover hidden causal connections, the conspiracy theories questioned effectively the validity of bureaucratic explanations of the fire.

Among the stories in circulation, those involving the possibility of arson became the most widely rehearsed. Because several detonations accompanied the fire, some reports attributed the fire to the use of explosive devices, possibly by the *cineteca*’s own employees.<sup>54</sup> While experts and public officers quickly dismissed this theory, Maximino Molina, leader of the short-lived Union of the Film Industry Workers (Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria Cinematográfica), found it implausible because “the film industry

51 Charles Tilly, *Why?*, 117.

52 As David Coady writes, “the extent to which it is rational to be skeptical of conspiracy theories partly depends on the extent to which it is rational to suppose that the official institutions responsible for gathering and disseminating information in one’s society are trustworthy.” See “An Introduction to the Philosophical Debate About Conspiracy Theories,” in *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, ed. David Coady (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 10.

53 Charles L. Briggs with Clara Mantini-Briggs, *Stories in the Time of Cholera. Racial Profiling During a Medical Nightmare* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 252.

54 According to a reporter, “los hechos y versiones de testigos presenciales indican que se trató de un bombazo.” See Anonymous, “El cine mexicano, sin historia.” The possibility of sabotage was also entertained by representatives of insurance companies La Nacional, Provincial, and Comercial.

does not have enemies of this kind.”<sup>55</sup> And yet, the possibility of sabotage picked up some steam after a series of reports on the film archive’s working conditions. It was no secret that Margarita López Portillo’s administration and recent staff changes had left a good number of workers disgruntled. Most of the staff had worked in the *cineteca* since 1974, and had successfully weathered the bureaucratic changes at the top. However, the appointment of Jorge Durán Chávez as head of the Bureau of Cinematography—the fourth one in less than five years—brought about radical changes. In less than a year, Durán Chávez fired experienced subdirectors of the *cineteca*’s departments of registry, supervision, and cultural and administrative services. The staff changes at the film archive even reached down to key personnel such as secretaries, photographers, technicians, and archivists.<sup>56</sup>

Durán Chávez had been in the job barely one year when he decided to resign his post to join the presidential campaign of Miguel de la Madrid. In a strange coincidence, Durán Chávez was expected to attend a farewell cocktail party in his honor in the building’s lobby the night of the fire. He had just parked his car in the parking lot when he was informed that there was smoke coming from the vaults. After a quick inspection of the basement, he ordered an evacuation of the building. While he helped evacuate the Salvador Toscano theater, a powerful explosion brought down part of the ceiling, injuring the officer in the head.<sup>57</sup> He was buried in the debris but eventually managed to dig himself out. In the aftermath of the fire, Durán Chávez refused to make statements of any kind to the media, thus leaving the task of explaining the destruction of the nation’s film archive to others. His “suspicious” vanishing from the limelight furthered fueled conspiracy theories of all sorts.<sup>58</sup>

Margarita López Portillo herself was the subject of much

55 Eugenio Ortiz Carreño, Mario Peralta and Roberto Hernández, “El número oficial de lesionados es de 150,” *Gráfico*, March 25, 1982, 1 and 8.

56 Rubén Torres, “Carlos de Landero, director de Relaciones Públicas de RTC, fue presentado ayer,” *El Heraldo de México*, April 1, 1982.

57 “Anonymous,” *Alarma*, no. 988, March 27, 1982. See also Durán Chávez’s later recollections of the conflagration in Raquel Peguero, “Incierto paradero del total de los dibujos mexicanos de Eisenstein,” *La Jornada*, July 21, 1996.

58 “Aparecen más películas históricas, ¿pero dónde están los funcionarios?,” *Esto*, March 28, 1982.

speculation, as dissident groups had targeted her before. On August 11, 1976, Margarita survived a violent kidnapping attempt by the urban guerrilla *Liga 23 de septiembre* in Mexico City. In the intense shootout, her bodyguards killed the *Liga's* leader, David Jiménez Sarmiento, and injured assailant Alicia Ríos Merino as she fled the scene. With the attack on her sister still fresh in his mind, José López Portillo intensified the crackdown against urban leftist groups as soon as he took office.<sup>59</sup> The night of the fire, Margarita was scheduled to inaugurate a painting exhibit by architect Irma de la Paz around 7:00 p.m. —i.e. minutes before the first explosions took place.<sup>60</sup> The possibility that the fire had been a form of retaliation loomed large in people's imagination.

### *Codes and Technical Accounts: The Commission's Report*

The explosive experts of the federal police began work amidst an atmosphere of pervasive and overriding pessimism. "Why look for culprits?" wrote journalist Miguel Bueno, "in Mexico, no one is to blame for anything."<sup>61</sup> Similarly, political commentator Manú Dornbierer despaired about the possibility of ever knowing the true magnitude of the disaster, "as it usually happens in this country."<sup>62</sup>

By definition, commissions produce technical reports that concentrate their giving of reasons on cause-and-effect relationships. They back their conclusions on widely accepted professional procedures and the assumed expertise of the commission's members. As a form of reason-giving, technical accounts differ from conventions and stories: "they combine cause-effect explanations (rather than logics of appropriateness) with grounding in some systematic specialized discipline (rather than

59 See Jorge Luis Sierra, *El enemigo interno: contrainsurgencia y fuerzas armadas en México* (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés, 2003), 83.

60 See Armando Mora, "¡Humo, explosiones, fuego y horror! Cómo fue destruida la cineteca nacional como se lo refirió a Armando Mora," *Esto*, April 4, 1982. That same day, a collective exhibition was to be inaugurated at 7:30 in the entrance hall of the Fernando de Fuentes theater. The fire consumed all of the artwork in the exhibit (30 pieces in total). "Destruídas 30 obras de Gráfica Mexicana," *unomásuno*, March 26, 1982.

61 Miguel Bueno, "Réquiem por la cineteca."

62 Manú Dornbierer, "La Cineteca," *Novedades*, March 29, 1982.

everyday knowledge).”<sup>63</sup> However, technical accounts often interact with *codes*, a form of reason-giving that often cites “specialized sets of categories, procedures of ordering evidence, and rules and interpretation.”<sup>64</sup> While outsiders might find codes annoying, specialists rely on them to produce their accounts and authorize their findings.

Following professional procedures, the investigators were entrusted with the tasks of ascertaining the origin of the fire, identifying the fuel and ignition source, determining the cause, and establishing the responsibility for the incident. Attaining such goals demanded expert knowledge on the chemistry and behavior of fires in relation to their speed and rate of burn, fuel load, smoke and flame color, burn patterns, and so on. Professional regulations and codes required as well a careful physical examination of the fire scene, including exterior and interior examinations, rooms and points of origin, and a probing search for evidence of incendiarism or accidental causes.<sup>65</sup>

The investigators had no problem establishing the origin of the explosion, as the area that suffered most of the damage was located in the vaults on the ground floor. Moreover, the contents of vault number 2 left no doubt about the source of the first detonation (see sketch 1). However, identifying the source of ignition was an entirely different matter. As discussed above, Margarita López Portillo had initially zeroed in on deteriorating nitrate spontaneously igniting as the culprit. Later, on March 25, explosives experts of Mexico City’s police force attributed the conflagration to a grease fire in the “Wings” restaurant located in the premises.<sup>66</sup> The restaurant’s manager denied this version forcefully by also pointing out that the damages to the eatery had been negligible.<sup>67</sup>

The investigators concluded that the fire started in the first floor, somewhere between the theater Salvador Toscano and the

63 Charles Tilly, *Why?* 130.

64 *Ibidem*, 131.

65 On fire investigations, see John J. Lentini, *Scientific Protocols for Fire Investigation*, 2nd. ed. (Boca Raton, Florida: CRS Press, 2013), 125-162.

66 Anonymous, “Incendio infernal.”

67 Anonymous, “Incendio infernal.” See also, Conrado de la Torre, Salvador Castañeda, Juventino Chávez and Alfredo de León, “Aseguran que el material fílmico que guardaba la cineteca eran puras copias,” *Novedades*, March 26, 1982.

*cineteca*'s main office (see sketch 2). As the heat traveled to the vaults below, they speculated, nitrate film caught fire, releasing a powerful explosion that destroyed Toscano's theater and sent the *cineteca*'s marquee hundreds of feet away.<sup>68</sup> However, in a 2004 interview, former *cineteca* director Fernando Macotela claimed to have seen intact several reels of nitrate film among the vault's ruins.<sup>69</sup> The last attempt at offering a technical account of the fire was provided by the editors of the *cineteca*'s *Memoria* of 1982. Building upon the report, the editors attributed the cause of fire to the overheating of the electric wires that fed the projection system of the theater above. This was an unlikely scenario, for as stated in the report, the theater Salvador Toscano was not in operation the day of the fire.<sup>70</sup> In the end, the experts failed to determine the cause of the fire and to establish the responsibility for the incident, thus confirming the pessimistic prognosis of journalists and intellectuals.

### *(Almost) Nothing to Mourn*

What was lost in the fire? Not much, according to Rubén Treviño Castillo, Director of Churubusco studios, and other film bureaucrats. In his eyes, there was "little to grieve about" for the *cineteca* was merely *an archive of film copies* and it was likely that the producers kept the negatives in their own archives.<sup>71</sup> Many films in the *cineteca*'s collection were safe because they were on loan to TV stations and foreign cultural institutions, or had been sent before the fire to laboratories for restoration.<sup>72</sup> Besides, a good

68 *Memoria de la cineteca nacional* (Mexico City: Dirección General de Radio, Televisión y Cinematografía – Secretaría de Gobernación, 1982), 4-6.

69 "A pesar de que, según la versión oficial, el desastre se produjo con la explosión del material de nitrato almacenado en el sótano del edificio, (Fernando) Macotela asegura que semanas después del siniestro pudo visitar los restos y vio que había material de nitrato en las bóvedas." See, Juan Solís, "Lo que el fuego se llevó," *El universal*, January 14, 2004.

70 *Memoria de la cineteca nacional*, 1982, 4-6.

71 See, "Sí a colaborar para crear una nueva *cineteca*," *El Sol de México*, March 27, 1982.

72 Before the advent of television, film producers exploited films for about five years. Many were destroyed after this period because of the high costs of maintenance. Far from contributing to the decline of the film industry, television breathed



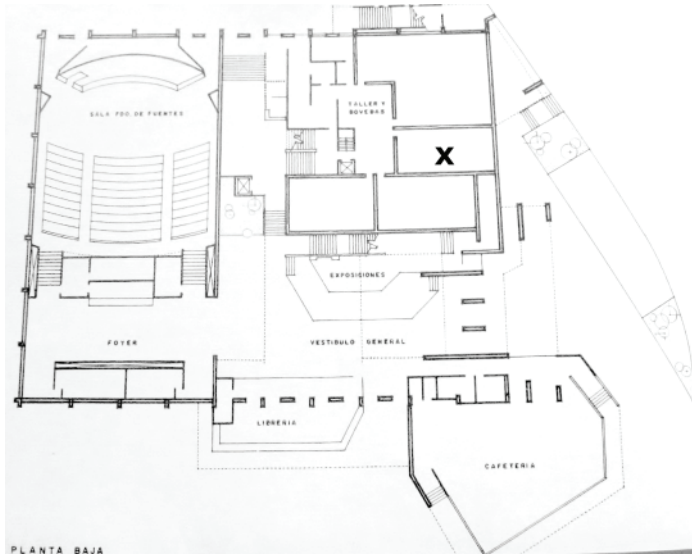


Figure 4: Sketch of the *cineteca*'s Ground Floor. Source: *Memoria de la Cineteca Nacional* (Mexico City: Dirección de Cinematografía – Secretaría de Gobernación, 1974). An 'X' identifies the site of explosion located by the Federal Attorney General Police.

number of copies of the lost films were held in the Filmoteca of the UNAM (Mexico's National Autonomous University), which became overnight the most important film archive of the nation.<sup>73</sup>

The film community of Mexico City received these baffling statements with renewed anger and indignation. Film directors pointed out that many of the old film companies had long disappeared, along with their film negatives. Moreover, it was not clear who would pay for the hefty costs of copying the films to acetate

new life into old films by putting them on the air. See, "La Cámara Nacional del Cine apoyará la reconstrucción de la cineteca," *El Heraldo de México*, March 27, 1982, 1D and 4D.

<sup>73</sup> As expected, Manuel González Casanova, director of the Filmoteca, assured the Mexican people that the film heritage of the nation had not been lost in the fire: "los medios informativos han exagerado al especular sobre el daño sufrido por el acervo histórico filmico." "Sí a colaborar para crear una nueva *cineteca*," *El Sol de México*, March 27, 1982.

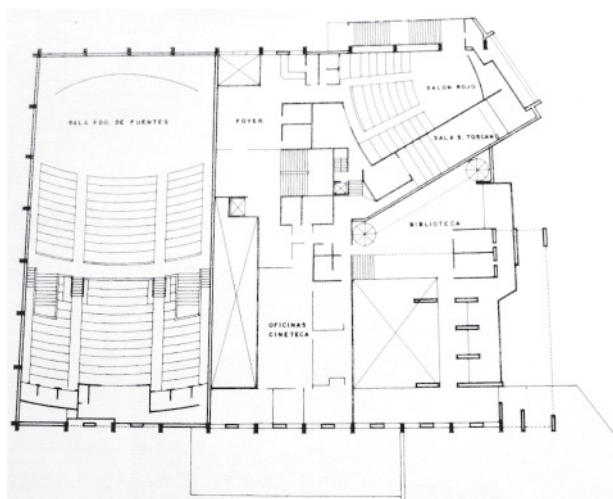


Figure 5: Sketch of the Cineteca's First Floor. Source: Memoria de la Cineteca Nacional, 1974

in the remote case that any lost originals were ever located.<sup>74</sup> Finally, actors and film critics took exception to the authorities' rhetoric of recovery, for the *cineteca* never made public its catalogues and it was thus impossible to know exactly what had been lost.<sup>75</sup> Filmmaker Marcela Violante did not hesitate to call this a *secreto de Estado* ("State secret"), thus implying that it was sensitive information which might endanger national security if disclosed.

Particularly disturbing of this rhetoric of recovery was the fact that authorities systematically refused to acknowledge the high

74 Filmmakers estimated that a black and white copy amounted to 15 to 20 thousand pesos, while color copies amounted to 60 to 70 thousand pesos. "Sí a colaborar"; Anonymous, "Que la industria vaya al rescate de la Cineteca Nacional: Eduardo Gazón; la Cámara Cinematográfica Apoya," *Novedades*, March 26, 1982.

75 "¿Usted sabe cuántos filmes había? Jamás se manejó una cifra... iera secreto de Estado!", stated angrily by filmmaker Marcela Fernández Violante. See, Anonymous, "Sí a colaborar para crear una nueva *cineteca*," *El Sol de México*, March 27, 1982. See also Emilio García Riera, "Lo que el fuego se llevó."

number of people killed —most of them students. Initial police reports limited the death toll to five or seven, and the number of injured to 51; more than twenty people went missing.<sup>76</sup> An expert in explosives estimated that at least 20 individuals had been trapped in the building,<sup>77</sup> while a witness claimed to have seen 15 corpses just in the coffee shop. Many were reduced to ashes.<sup>78</sup> The official toll was considered ridiculously low. “Only two persons died because of the cineteca’s fire,” claimed with sarcasm a political cartoon published in *Ovaciones*; “the rest had already died of fear (*muertas de miedo*).”<sup>79</sup> (see figure 5).

Many artists and intellectuals demanded an exhaustive investigation of the culprits for such “unforgivable tragedy”; others blamed squarely the erratic policies of film authorities of the last six years for the disaster. Film critic Emilio García Riera went as far as to demand the resignation of Margarita López Portillo.<sup>80</sup> In an angry statement, filmmaker Marcela Fernández Violante declared to reporters, “one could see this disaster coming from the beginning of this *sexenio*... I don’t claim that [the destruction of the *cineteca*] was done intentionally, I am just saying that this was a *direct*

76 An early report indicated that the fire left at least 300 persons injured. See Conrado de la Torre, Salvador Castañeda, Juventino Chávez and Alfredo Muñoz de León, “Aseguran que el material filmico”.

77 This was the estimate of Mayor José Silva Estrada of the Government of the Federal District. See, “Se incendió la cineteca,” *unomásuno*, March 25, 1982, 31-32. Three days later, a reporter indicated that 18 corpses had been recovered from the ruins. David García Salinas, “Ya van 18 cadáveres rescatados de la cineteca nacional,” *La Prensa*, March 28, 1982, 26-27. “Son 16 ya los muertos de la cineteca,” *Diario de México*, vespertino, March 29, 1982, 1.

78 “Un socorrista de la Cruz Roja [...] con voz entrecortada y tosiendo dijo: hay carbonizados,” Anonymous, “Incendio infernal.”

79 Anonymous, “Al arder la *cineteca*”; Anonymous “El cine mexicano, sin historia”; Manu Dornbierer, “La *cineteca*”; Anonymous, “Noche de horror, más muertos. Hablan de 15 sepultados en la cineteca,” *El Sol de México*, mediodía, March 25, 1982; Anonymous, “Se incendió la cineteca, *unomásuno*, March 25, 1982, 31-32. Early reports claimed that 150 individuals had been injured; this number was reduced significantly the following day. Similarly, one week after the fire, the official death toll was reduced to only three: Venustiano González Nieto (fireman), Taide Gómez Cuevas (employee of the *Cineteca*), and José Mercedes Castillo Cervantes. See, Eugenio Ortiz Carreño, Mario Peralta, and Roberto Hernández, “El número oficial.”

80 García Riera, “Lo que el fuego se llevó.”



Figure 6: “Cowards.” Source: *Ovaciones*, March 25, 1982.

consequence of the way our cinema has been administered.”<sup>81</sup> A political cartoon published at the time clearly connected López Portillo’s film policies with the recent disaster by claiming that the Mexican Film industry, already anemic, had now become amnesiac (see figure 6). In the eyes of others, the fact that the destruction of the *cineteca* took place shortly before the end of Margarita’s tenure, offered a fitting conclusion to a disastrous era for Mexican cinema’s past and present. As playwright Emilio Carballido remarked the day after the archive burned down: “They had already done away with

81 My italics. A similar statement was made by film critic Jorge Ayala Blanco, “y había que buscar a los culpables pero ellos son la falta de interés total del estado..” See, Raquel García Peguero and Salomón Risk Fontes, “De lamentable, trágico y sin perdón calificaron los cineastas mexicanos el incendio de la *Cineteca*,” *El Día*, 26 de marzo de 1982.

our national cinema's present, and they just now finished doing away with our past."<sup>82</sup>

### Coda

From the advent of cinema, dramatic tales of nitrate-fueled infernos in laboratories and projection booths endowed the task of archiving with a sense of urgency. Putting together an archive is always a risky endeavor, as the very act of archiving something in a location makes possible the destruction of what was previously scattered in private, small, or local collections. As the *cineteca* fire made evident, the possibility of loss is never cancelled with the creation of an archive, as the risk of erasure and obliteration is always attached to the exteriority of the place. As Jacques Derrida has recently reminded us, "the very gesture which consists in keeping safe—in a safe, so to speak—is always, and from the beginning threatened with destruction."<sup>83</sup>

This does not imply, however, that such risk should be reified. As Mary Douglas pointed out long ago, the acknowledgment of risk always entails a politics of vulnerability and blame allocation.<sup>84</sup> My goal in this chapter was to reconstruct such politics of vulnerability by analyzing the complex array of reasons offered at the time by actors, directors, film producers, intellectuals, and government officers to make sense of the loss of the archive. Beyond their specific content, "reasons make statements about relations between the people giving and receiving those reasons."<sup>85</sup> As we have seen, they are a crucial instrument to repair, challenge, or negotiate relations of power, authority, and hierarchy in society.<sup>86</sup> Besides destroying the *cineteca*, the fire put to test the relationship between

82 "‘Nos han privado’ de nuestra historia nacional filmica: Emilio García Rivera," *unomásuno*, 26 March 1982, 19.

83 Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever in South Africa," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 38-80; Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1996), 11.

84 Mary Douglas, *Risk and Blame* (London: Routledge, 1994), 3-21.

85 Charles Tilly, *Why?* 11.

86 Ibidem, 19-20.

**Sin palabras**

Figure 7: "Without Words." Source: *Ovaciones*, March 26, 1982.

the Mexican government and its citizenship, moving to the fore crucial debates about the State's cultural and economic policies. "Film has a personality, and that personality is self-destructive," famously commented Orson Welles. "The job of the archivist, he added, is to anticipate what the film may do and prevent it."<sup>87</sup> In describing the film archive as a self-destructing machine, Margarita López Portillo not only deflected her responsibility for the disaster, but also naturalized the risk of obliteration. Her critics knew better. In the words of Orson Welles, she was in a position to anticipate the nitrate film's next move.

87 Tom McGreevey, "Orson Welles defines 'The Job of the Archivist,'" in *This Film Is Dangerous*, eds. Roger Smither and Catherine A. Surowiec, 27.



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